

NED SNELL
2nd Place, Poetry, 2011 Utah Original Writing Competition (excerpts)

And Let Them Have Dominion . . .

To his dog, every man is Napoleon.

- Aldous Huxley

He walks past the fish tank and out the door.
Across the yard, the high-strung
stallion paces the wire fenceline.
It is another bitter
morning. Snowcakes hang
on sagging branches of the evergreen.

He is the feeder of the stock.
The glint of his sharp knife unbales
the hay, and all the animals run
to him. Only the swine are stuck
in separate pens. The rising sun peels
gray mist off the horizon.

Dumb as they are, the animals sense
that he is god. He clears
the water trough of ice. In a
burst, he's at the door again. Once
inside, he bares his hand and scatters
fish food into the tank like manna.

The Stone in Dalton's Pond

The stone from David's sling
that killed Goliath
lies buried in the valley of Elah.

Stones that Jacob took for his pillows
still form rounded loaves
somewhere on the outskirts of Haran.

They speak an ancient language
of miracles and power . . .

But, I'm so far from where I thought I'd be
since I held the rounded stone
that I skipped half-way across Dalton's pond
the summer I turned twelve.

Underestimated

Suppose it mattered that from the outset
I was poured into a mold and left to harden
to a life of flailing away at trifles.

Attach some grave importance to blending in,
to hanging around on street corners
lounging in barber shops or libraries
weighing ups and downs and ups and downs
and downs and downs . . .

Assume they have remedies for this,
shots or pills or therapists and blah blah blah -
I have revisited all the secret spots
and found nothing left there to unwrap.

So many things underestimated -
Amy Lowell tripping by in high heeled ribboned shoes,
Auden keening funeral blues.
Ach, du.
A nude Matisse lies on a bier of blue blue blue
the world is stuck on re-wind, constipated.

I am overwhelmed by no emotion.
As in a dream, I see death on a pale horse
approaching in his silent beauty,
an apparition skimming the earth in white white white
and I realize at once, something ancient and familiar
will rise up silent in the dark
to claim me.

Withdrawal

Because the moon has dropped so low,
no need for a lamp in this half-spent shack
where I'll remain a while. Nothing
but mile after silent white mile, except
for the brook's jagged frown and murmur
where the ice broke through
from the weight of that magnificent elk
whose spoor has long since vanished in the snow.

I summon the sommelier with a snap
and motion him to pour
which he does with grave exactitude
before disappearing through the wall
like the resurrected Christ.

O, Christ,
the moon's pocked flaws
magnify my aching tenfold here
where nothing shifts or thaws.

Collateral Damage

Up from the chimney of December's breath,
out of the chaos of frantic faces,
interval of wind against the upland heath
driving black ashes over stones and grasses,
draped in crackling shrouds and hoods of bone,
the grim ghosts of atrocity return.

Over and again, each small surprise
multiplies itself to a disaster.
I am haunted by the raisin eyes
and fragile body-sway of Anna's sister,
the way her dark hair hung across her face
tameless, and thick, and loose.

Whatever game the anxious mind can conjure,
whatever tale the garlic tongue can spin,
whether to exaggerate or injure,
(pap of gaping wound and fractured bone),
I am pinned beneath the constant weight
incoherent and disconsolate.

Even as the passing years provide
a scabbing over with its purple stain,
the linings of the clouds still bleed
in vivid, bright vermilion,
and on the fading skyline, I see
Anna's sister's hands upturned and empty.

War is kind, the poet says. Suppose
a pot of chicken in a dirt-sick shack,
and a can of soda pop could chase
the phobias away: the shock
of Anna's death, the droning bomber's hover,
the fact that she'll stay twelve years old forever.

December ghosts, April ghosts, they come
year round laced with scum and dung,
they smear their faces with a rancid cream
that reeks of shame and horror, then they hang
their tattered overcoats on splintered pegs
and return to their own vomit like dogs.

But I awake to my own sweat and screams,
over and over the same nightmarish hell
where I'm confronted with the mud-streaked names
of my dead comrades etched in some granite wall,
and sirens blaring subterfuge and lies,
and Anna's sister's blood-shot eyes.